

Truth, Proof and Evidence

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to discussions of a religious and spiritual nature, those who may be more sceptical of these things may assert they are not true as there is no proof or evidence. However what may be considered legitimate proof or evidence? Is something only true if it can be verified by scientific methods and observation? This session looks at different types of truth and which types of truth are most reliable.

ACTIVITY

Ask students to write the following two things on a post-it note and stick it on a white board or wall:

- Something they know is true
- How they know it is true or where they have gained this knowledge.

Explain to students that there are several types of truth. Ask students to try and come up with a group definition of truth.

Introduce and explain five different types of truth below:

- **EMPIRICAL** truths – the truth is what we can see and test. I know that dogs exist; this matches universally agreed observations of reality.
- **HISTORICAL** truths – the truth is what can be shown to have happened in the past. Henry VIII had six wives; there is plenty of historical evidence to prove it.
- **SUBJECTIVE MORAL** truths – the truth is what I think is right or wrong. Executing people for their crimes is wrong; this is what I ‘feel’ to be the truth.
- **ABSOLUTE MORAL** truths – some things are absolutely ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ whatever the motivations and consequences and whether individuals choose to believe it or not. Stealing is wrong; this is a moral judgement to be made, even if stealing is done to help a starving family.
- **SPIRITUAL** truths – the truth is what I *intuitively* feel and believe. It is true that ghosts exist; this matches my experience and wider understanding of the way things ‘really are’.

ACTIVITY

Ask students to consider the statements below. What kind of ‘truth’ or ‘truths’ do they think is being *claimed* by each statement, in relation to the types of truth above.

- Fish do not feel pain
- The death penalty puts people off committing violent crime
- People should have a check-up at the dentist every six months
- The sky is blue
- Liars always get found out
- True love lasts forever
- The earth is a sphere
- Gravity keeps us from floating into space
- Strawberries are the tastiest fruit
- Death is the end of life
- Life begins at birth
- Animals cannot talk
- There are twelve months in a year
- We are living in the 21st Century
- Liverpool are the best football team
- God forgives anyone who is truly sorry
- What goes around comes around
- People who behave badly will be punished in some way
- God has spoken to us through the Holy Book – the Qur'an
- God came down to Earth in the form of Jesus to save us from sin
- I will be reborn in another body after my death
- Somewhere in the world I have a Soul-mate
- Murder is wrong

Point out that some ‘truths’ appear to be claiming one thing, but may actually be more like another type of truth, or not really true at all – how can we ‘know’?

ACTIVITY

Ask students to respond to the following question:

- *Are some types of truth more reliable than others?*

Explain that many people argue that the existence of a God cannot be empirically verified. Could science be used to prove God in any way?

Explain that for some Christians one sign of the presence of God is the phenomenon known from New Testament times as ‘speaking in tongues’. In a Christian context, this is where a person appears to be inspired by the Holy Spirit to speak in an unknown ‘heavenly language’, that is then often interpreted by another believer. Recent experiments have taken place upon people speaking in tongues and have shown some unusual activity to be taking place in the brain. Could this be evidence of the supernatural?

Show the students the clip below about speaking in tongues and ask them to say whether they think this is empirical evidence of the Holy Spirit:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZbQBajYnEc

CONCLUSION

Encourage the students to reflect on the following questions:

Can we ever find empirical evidence for God?

Does it matter if there is no empirical evidence for God's existence?